

Black students can compete on world scientific stage

I was born and raised in small, rural Bennettsville, S.C. I am a proud graduate of Spelman College in Atlanta, the only historically black college listed among U.S. World and News Report's best liberal arts colleges in the United States.

So I want to brag on a young Bennettsville native and Spelman College student in this column and remind all of us that black children, black girls and young women, and black college students can compete with anybody if we expect them to and make sure they are prepared to. Spelman prepares young women to compete on a world stage.

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

My Bennettsville homegirl, Karina Liles, is a Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools intern. Her sister, Jalaya, is also an honors graduate of Spelman, former Freedom School intern, and now a Freedom Schools program associate in Bennettsville. Karina and

almost 650 mostly black college students are teaching nearly 6,000 children to learn to love to read and to serve others in more than 75 Freedom Schools in 44 cities and 22 states this summer after intensive training at CDF-Haley Farm in Tennessee. But Karina also is one of the six-woman team of Spelman computer science students who have programmed a computer-operated dog called the "SpelBot."

Spelman's Web page says that 30 years from now, when historians look back to see how historically black colleges and universities were involved in robotics research, Spelman will dominate their findings. Spelman reports that the SpelBots RoboCup Soccer Team recently qualified for the 2005 International RoboCup four-legged robot soccer competition to be held in Osaka, Japan on July 13-19. The SpelBots' (short for Spelman robotics) participation in the competition was no small feat. Out of the 24 teams from around the world that qualified, Spelman is the first and only HBCU, the only all-women's institution, and the only solely undergraduate American institution to qualify. The other U.S. teams are from Carnegie Mellon University, Georgia Tech, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Texas at Austin. The remaining teams are from Europe, South America, Asia, and Australia.

In RoboCup soccer matches, teams put four-legged robots in a soccer competition. Spelman's team writes and programs the complex graduate-student level computer software that allows the sophisticated robot dogs to play a competitive soccer game completely autonomously, or without any human intervention. The robots must find the soccer ball, the goal, and their competition, make their own strategy for scoring goals and defending their own goal, and then kick, pass, and block the ball, all without a remote control. The research topics and technology involved include computer vision, localization, motion and locomotion, robot path planning, multi-robot coordination, and robot communication.

I do not understand all of this technology, but our children need to understand it in this rapidly globalizing and highly competitive world. I'm so proud of Spelman students who are breaking new ground. I salute Spelman's fine new president, Beverly Tatum, and Spelman's faculty who set a standard of excellence.

Let's root for our young women as they go out to compete on a world stage. Go SpelBots! Go black youths! You can do and be anything!

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN is CEO and founder of the Children's Defense Fund.



PHOTO/TOMEKA DE PRIEST

Students from Spelman College in Atlanta and their SpelBots will compete in RoboCup 2005 in Osaka, Japan, next week.

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Diamonds aren't best friend to Sierra Leone's people

Despite what the title may imply, the remix to rapper Kanye West's latest song titled Diamonds is not an ode to the sparkling stones. Instead, West devotes his bars to addressing the illegal diamond trade in Sierra Leone in West Africa.

A brutal civil war has been raging in Sierra Leone since about 1991, funded by the diamonds mined there and sold in the United States and other places. Though most of its residents suffer from widespread poverty, the region boasts diamond-rich fields and vast diamond deposits. Rival militias battling over blood-diamonds have killed and mutilated thousands of civilians. Children as young as 7 years old work in the mines for hours a day. Rebels sell some of the gems for cash and exchange others for weapons that have kept the war going. While the situation in Sierra Leone is nothing new, it can become a deeper quandary considering the current state of America's bling, bling hip hop culture.

Diamonds are a mainstay in the lyrics and videos and on the bodies of most of today's hip hop artists. On a regular basis, rap stars seem to be sporting the biggest and brightest diamonds of all celebrities. Every other rap song seems to glorify being "iced out" and literally out-shining the next person. I am not at all opposed to people lavishing themselves with finer things as a result of their financial success. But with some of the world's most popular and wealthiest rap stars being African American, it is impossible to ignore the dynamic between the image of success that diamonds represent here and the reality of oppression they represent thousands of miles away.

In his song, Kanye West recites: "Good morning, this ain't Vietnam/ Still, people lose hands, legs, arms for real/ It was known, in Sierra Leone/ When I speak about diamonds in this song/ I ain't talking about the ones that are glowing/ I'm talking about Roc-A-Fella, my home/ These ain't conflict diamonds, is they Jacob?/ Don't lie to me, man/ See, a part of me saying, 'Keep shining'/ How, when I know what a blood diamond is? / Though it's thousands of miles away, Sierra Leone connect to what we go through today / Over here it's the drug trade, we die from drugs. Over there, they die from what we buy from drugs / The diamonds, the chains, the bracelets, the charms is / I thought my Jesus piece was so harmless/ 'til I saw a picture of a shorty armless/ And here's the conflict."

A conflict indeed. The Jacob West mentions in the verse above is Jacob the Jeweler, diamond jewelry designer to the stars. Expressing apparent internal conflict, West pleads with Jacob in the song to tell him that his diamonds are not the product of the conflict in Sierra Leone. But it is possible they are.

Reports say that the diamond industry has helped the government there put certificates on packages of diamonds that are mined legally and marketed through official channels. But that accounts for only 10 to 20 percent of the diamonds that are dug up every year, and diamond experts still have a difficult time telling the difference.

It has been predicted that rebels account for 85 to 90 percent of total production in Sierra Leone. According to research, experts estimate that between 10 and 15 percent of diamonds produced around the world are conflict diamonds, but they represent a higher share of gem-quality stones. Gem quality stones are clean pieces of stones extracted from mining, which can be used in jewelry by way of cutting, carving and polishing. In other words, they are the ones that can end up as human ornaments.

It is not uncommon to see some rappers with diamonds decorating their teeth, diamond necklace pendants as big as saucers, and I even saw a rapper use diamonds as ice cubes once to cool his drink. At a Bobcats game, one famous rapper's diamond earrings were so big, I could see them sparkling from his courtside seat. And I was in the nosebleed section.

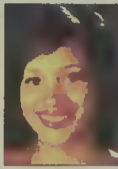
I do not mean to blame rappers as the only or the most willing contributors to the destruction in Sierra Leone. The diamonds are hard to trace and many people and industries enjoy them. But given the prolific endorsement of diamonds by some hip hop stars, coupled with the power of their immense celebrity status, they may have the unique ability to influence this cause.

Recently, an event titled Live 8 was held in various cities worldwide to highlight the problem of global poverty. The series of concerts and events was designed to influence leaders of eight of the world's richest countries who will meet at the G8 Summit on July 6th and be presented with a workable plan to double aid, drop the debt and make trade laws fair. Some of today's hottest artists, including Kanye West, Destiny's Child, U2 and Mariah Cary performed. It was simulcast around the world and was the biggest on-line event in history.

With hip-hop music being the global phenomenon it is today, the Sierra Leone conflict could be a perfect opportunity for artists to join their rap colleague, West, in the quest he has begun. I can not help but think about that impact if hip hop stars, as famous for their 'bling' as they are for their beats, were to organize an event similar to Live 8 to speak out against Sierra Leone's rampant violence and its ill-gotten gains.

It may not provide a final resolution as the issue is much more complicated than that. But it could be a productive start-especially if diamonds are supposed to be forever.

E-mail Post columnist ANGELA LINDSAY at lindsaylaw00@yahoo.com



ANGELA LINDSAY

Pughsley's real legacy at CMS

It was my good fortune to have engaged in several discussions with Dr. James Pughsley, on both a group and one-on-one basis, having exchanged perspectives with him on many issues related to Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. Therefore, I can affirm that he projected an aura of a consummate professional and a man of admirable decency. Indeed, like many other



GYASI A. FOLUKE

African Americans, I was pleased to observe the rare phenomenon of someone "who looks like me" as the top administrator of CMS. Moreover, shortly after he was selected to be superintendent in 2002, I conveyed to him my belief that soon he could expect the "wolves to be at his door" because of his "color," among other reasons, and I pledged my personal support in the event of such perceived attacks-support primarily because his successor may have a more undesirable philosophical-racial orientation towards us.

The above factors notwithstanding, some of us also recall that Jim Pughsley was part of a "team" under Eric Smith who promised us in 1996 that he would close the black-white academic gap to within 10 points by the year 2001. But this gap remains today, in the range of 40 points, generally excluding very laudable achievements in reading and math, the

major focus of state and federal standards. Moreover, this same "team" was instrumental in removing Mr. Kenneth Simmons as principal from West Charlotte High School-even though Ken Simmons, heroically, was attempting to do what still needs doing, i.e., significantly improving the education of students, especially Black students, at that school. For West Charlotte is one of several schools

Pughsley

within CMS that is engaged in "academic genocide" among "at-risk" students, according to Superior Court Judge Howard Manning. Of course and perhaps tangentially, some of us also recall that Eric Smith, allegedly, accepted at least a \$25,000 bribe from McGraw-Hill Publishers, perhaps to promote their books within CMS, although the "silence has been deafening" in this community about this potential corruption or "spiritual wickedness in high places." Moreover, there are other "school-house secrets" that need to be revealed in this community.

Clearly, we may discern a more perceptive critique of Pughsley's legacy at CMS by reading The Mis-education of the Negro (1933), by Dr. Carter G. Woodson, and my third book, The Crisis and Challenge of Black Mis-education in America: Confronting the Destruction of African People Through Euro-centric Public Schools (2001). For, among other factors, the curriculum of this system teaches our black students, subconsciously, to worship white people, while teaching them, both simultaneously and subconsciously, to hate themselves, as narrated, in part, by Dr. James Lowen in "Lies My Teacher Told Me" (1995).

And Pughsley was a victim insofar as he received his formal "education" at Euro-centric institutions of "higher education" (sic) that, apparently, provided him with little or no genuine education on his great, ancient African heritage-culture, "The Cradle of Civilization."

Finally, to reiterate, Jim Pughsley, like his predecessor Eric Smith, has done a good job, in relative terms, of improving academic achievement among all students in the very narrow area of reading and mathematics. But our students, especially Black students, have a critical NEED for African centered, wholistic education, as recently mandated, in part, by the city of Philadelphia and the state of New Jersey. Equally important, Dr. Pughsley and other public officials need better to understand that there are no cheap or easy solutions, authentically, to "close the racial gap" between our students. As Professor Roger Wilkins has noted, "We can't have equal outcomes for children whose parents face dreadfully unequal economic circumstances in this life." And surely, a 51 percent Black poverty rate, in contrast to a 12 percent rate for whites in Charlotte, reflects such dreadful circumstances. Indeed, as the late Honorable Elijah Muhammad has observed, "Those who do not treat you right cannot be expected to teach you right." Amen!

GYASI A. FOLUKE, MA, DD, a non-traditional Minister, is an author-lecturer-consultant, public access television producer, retired Air Force officer and part-time CEO of The Kushite Institute for Wholistic Development.

